Where is the Muranów Lily? Unearthing Traces of Queer Jewishness in Contemporary Warsaw

Aleksandra Gajowy

I want to tell you about a painting. A painting that is meant to be hanging here in the Museum. It is a painting of a flower, believed to be the work of the artist Roman Kramsztyk. Others suspect it is an early work by the celebrated painter Tamara de Lempicka. […] Alas, the debate will likely never be resolved, for the painting in question has gone missing. […] Some say it never existed in the first place. What is known is that it is a painting of a flower, a bouquet of flowers — a bouquet of the fabled Muranów Lilies.¹ (Benny Nemer, 2015)

Introduction

The lily had never existed—but they might have. If it is not the possibility of touching their gently elongated, cream-white petals to assure ourselves that the flower is right there in front of us, it is the fantasy of such a gesture that may become a tangible sensation on our fingers and in front of our eyes. The painting of the lily was never stolen from a museum because it had never been painted, yet we may imagine the flower’s delicate outline on a canvas. The images appearing in my mind as I wander around Warsaw’s neighbourhood of Muranów, the city’s former centre of Jewish life, of people living, walking, chatting, kissing, flirting, dating, working, might be but a mere product of my willing imagination. Yet, accessing these sensations viscerally, experiencing the palpable affect of touching what and who is no longer there, inspires a kind of search of histories that evade books, museums or archive catalogues. It puts forward questions, perhaps without answers, yet questions we must ask: how may we connect with histories of lives lost in the archives, forgotten, even imaginary? What in particular do we discover about history engaging with narratives which have at their core desire and sex? How can desire and affect bring us closer to communities we reach out to across time?

In this essay, I follow the suggestions for forging embodied encounters with Warsaw’s queer Jewish pasts that the artist Benny Nemer offers in his 2015 audio guide Lilia z Muranowa (The Muranów Lily), commissioned by POLIN, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. I provide a landscape which the listener or the performer of Nemer’s experimental tale may engender with their desire, their body and their fantasy in order to restore lives lost and forgotten in the archives, who enliven the desiring archival subject: a queer Polish Jew. As the article is spun around the agential role of the flower, throughout I refer to the Muranów lily as ‘they/them’, including in singular, to acknowledge the theory-making potential of the flower in Nemer’s audio guide, as well as the more broadly conceived ‘ontological multiplicity and often-complex sex and gender presentations’ of plants.²

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DOI: 10.1093/arthistory/ulae017

Art History ISSN 0141-6790 XX | X |
Month 0000 | pages XX-XX
In the first section, I recount the making of the audio guide and its placement within the broader practice of Nemer. I discuss how the absence of historical artefacts from POLIN’s Core Exhibition may offer possibilities for queer and trans methods of archiving and memorialising through precisely the objectlessness of the Museum. In section two, I relay Nemer’s tale as it unfolds in the audio guide. This part provides an overview of the previous writings on The Muranów Lily and takes them as openings or starting points to further explorations into the piece. In the third section, I develop a conceptualisation of the titular lily as a dybbuk, and discuss how we may see their puzzling appearance, as told by Nemer, as a queer and decolonial warning resounding across history in the face of the legacies of the European Enlightenment, resonant also in museal narratives and their silences and omissions. In the last section, through a reading of two early twentieth-century plays, An-Sky’s The Dybbuk (1913–16) and Scholem Asch’s The God of Vengeance (1906), I propose a landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ashkenazi Jewish sexualities and gender in Warsaw. I argue that the plays, as cultural vehicles, are crucial to a nuanced understanding of Nemer’s dybbuk hauntings and illuminate the tactility of the embodied connections The Muranów Lily enables. Through their prism, resonating in Nemer’s work, I attend to the queer Jewish lives in Poland, which remain both uncelebrated and ungrieved, haunting the landscape of contemporary Warsaw with their unresolvedness. I ask how we may allow ourselves to be haunted and possessed to make contact, remember and memorialise these lives lost to archives and to history, and how we may do so through our own desire, perhaps enlivening what Elizabeth Freeman calls ‘erotohistoriography’, a turned-on, embodied sense of encountering history in the present. In doing so, I experiment with speculation-as-history and history-as-fabulation, challenging the artificial divisions between fact and fiction, pointing out that historical or scientific ‘fact’ may be as speculative as legend, and fiction may unearth what we no longer recognise as historical for the lack of its archival evidence. At times collapsing the two in a purposeful confusion, this paper considers its worldmaking possibilities liminally, in a space where fact and fiction are both and neither all at once.

The Lily and the Museum

For Benny Nemer, The Muranów Lily was his second venture into the audio guide as an experimental performative artistic medium, part of the trajectory of his practice investigating possibilities of voice and sound to unearth and animate queer affects in history, often through embodied and desiring speculation. Nemer’s multimedia practice ‘mediates emotional encounters with musical, botanical, art historical and queer cultural material, encouraging deep listening and empathic viewing’. These preoccupations have, over the years, manifested in different mediums, including video and sound pieces, performances or works exploring affective potentialities of flowers, letters and personal queer archives and libraries.

In our conversation about The Muranów Lily, conducted in June 2022, Nemer told me that this audio guide had been conceived before his PhD research at the University of Edinburgh (2016–19), and it was only in the later attempts that he conceptualised the instinctual research conducted for the POLIN work. The later audio guides such as Trees Are Fags (2018), Interludes (2018, Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm) or The Making Known (2022, Flaten Art Museum, Northfield, Minnesota), as well as the doctoral project I Do not Know Where Paradise Is (2019, The Playfair Library, Edinburgh), allowed Nemer to develop methodologies of working with voice and sound rooted in speculative fiction, cruising as research method and decolonial practice.
Are Fags, for example, Nemer follows a logic of cruising as method which Fiona Anderson characterises as a ‘sense of resistance to the projection of a predetermined outcome or product for one’s work in advance, working in an open-ended or non-linear mode, without a delineated narrative’. The audio guide, or what Nemer calls ‘a narrated audio walk’, sets out to develop a potentially desiring relation between the listener and a tree, as it weaves connections between gay men and trees in the context of cruising. The work is not attached to a single space or context beyond a recommendation that the listener finds themselves in the proximity of trees for an embodied encounter between the story and their surroundings. The possibilities, narratively and spatially, are endless.

Nemer is also developing a conceptualisation of the audio guide as decolonial intervention in his practice. His work Interludes is an encounter with a bust of an African man on display at the Thielska Galleriet in Stockholm entitled Neger (a Swedish word for ’Negro’). Nemer questions the namelessness of the portrayed man, wonders about his story and provenance lost in the violence of a colonial encounter, and in doing so asks the listener—and the viewer—to reverse the subject/object relationship with the work, offering ’themselves as an object to the subjectivity of the sculpture’.

The narrational and spatial open-endedness, the question of naming and categorisation, the reversals of subjectivity are all recurring themes in Nemer’s work, and certainly The Muranów Lily foreshadows his subsequent conceptualisations not simply of the audio guide as a medium, but specifically how transgressions of its traditional form may aid his purposes of queering, transing and decolonising the museal narrative. Nemer understands the audio guide as a possibility to engage with a historical subject on their own terms—or at least imagine doing so. Progressively, Nemer became interested in exploring the questions of disobedience and a wilful audio guide listener, a possibility which allows for a deep reconsideration of the practices and politics of the museum. His audio guides transgress the here and now of the listener and the viewer—though The Muranów Lily is more conscripted to a place than a piece like Trees Are Fags, its instructions are not always unambiguous (I kept losing and finding my way as Nemer’s voice guided me around POLIN), and the terrain he describes continues to change (as becomes clear in the last section of this essay). The audio guide may thus help us embody and, for a moment, enliven the absences of which Nemer speaks and which permeate contemporary Warsaw. His audio guides allow for a space of contemplative encounters with histories, particularly those unacknowledged or silenced by an institutional narrative. It hardly matters which route we take: the ghosts are always already there.

Flowers are similarly a sustained presence in Nemer’s practice as ‘witnesses of, and participants in, human history’. Through a logic—and aesthetic—of encounters, which presume no ownership or hierarchy, Nemer investigates human–plant relations as well as a performative possibility embedded in a flower to enliven forgotten histories through animating sensual, tactile and olfactory memory. An encounter with a flower may prompt a memory not simply of events and histories, but also our affective, visceral responses to them.

In our conversation, Nemer reflected on The Muranów Lily as a budding form of his audio guide practice, later informed by his PhD research. He laughed off this piece as ‘ridiculous, far-fetched and bizarre’, but recognised the reflective and affective potential the piece produced nonetheless. The Muranów Lily was an outcome of a residency programme The Open Museum—Education in Action, hosted by POLIN in February and March 2015.

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traces, the programme investigated questions of Jewish identity, heritage and their transnational affinities.\(^6\) The completed audio guide was, for a time, available to borrow from the Museum’s ticket counter, but the institution encouraged visitors to download a file to listen on their own devices. The files continue to be available on the Museum website in both Polish and English.\(^7\) The audio guide was part of the 2016 exhibition Obecność/Brak/Siady. Współczesni artyści o żydowskiej Warszawie (Presence/Absence/Traces. Contemporary artists on Jewish Warsaw) bringing the artworks conceived during the residencies together. The exhibition set out to explore how the artists, ‘[t]aking up the subject of tangible and intangible heritage, … referred both to the canon of Jewish culture and to the clichés and stereotypes that have grown around it. By focusing on micro-history, they sparked universal questions that went far beyond the local context’.\(^8\) It is difficult to trace the afterlives of the audio guide—in the exhibition, it was contextualised as part of the show and an outcome of Nemer’s residency; this context is still found on the POLIN website. Beyond, however, as the visitors can access the audio guide freely via the Museum website (which could even mean that they forego a tour of the exhibitions completely), the audio guide, as well as ways of engagement it forges, are not necessarily traceable. The Muranów Lily occasionally resurfaces in a broader context of Jewish culture in Warsaw: for example, in 2020, it featured in the programme of the annual Singer’s Warsaw Jewish Culture Festival, organised by the Shalom Foundation.\(^9\) While the audio guide remains a clearly important intervention into the landscape of contemporary Jewish culture in Warsaw, it seems to have flown largely under the radar. Thus it remains interstitial, available but unpublicised, un- or anti-monumental, slowly and haphazardly trickling into at least some avenues of accessing queer Jewish lives in Poland.

Owing to his Ashkenazi descendance, Nemer told me that producing this audio guide was compelling to him insofar as it allowed for an embodied reconnection of sorts with his long-lasting interest in Yiddish through which he discovered Isaac Bashevis Singer’s work, and his renewed connection ‘nourished a certain need in [him] to have a kind of queer imaginary around the old shtetl world’.\(^{10}\) He approached the project with caution, however, mindful of the ways in which the North American Jewish experience in Eastern Europe tends to centre ‘the North American Jewish optics on Eastern Europe’, and the research he conducted for the audio guide visibly engages with local historical sources and geographies. It was also, according to Nemer, an isolating experience, limiting the extent to which he could immerse himself in the context of lived Jewish experience in Warsaw now, as, despite working at POLIN, he encountered virtually no Jewish people there. Nemer also told me that he has wondered about the afterlives of the work after 2015, observing the tense Polish political scene and the underlying attitudes of homophobia and anti-Semitism. Indeed this has been a particularly fraught relationship in recent years, with right-wing political discourse deliberate ‘Judaification’ of Polish queers and a very tangible ghettoization of LGBT+ people in Poland, repeating the Nazi tactics of separation predicated on the fallacious conflating of racial, sexual and gender difference.\(^{21}\) The Jewish–queer parallels in Poland are known: Agnieszka Graff, for example, notes how anti-Semitism and homophobia have morphed into reactions against a ‘hateful pariah who somehow also represents the EU’, exemplified by the slurs shouted at gay pride (‘Lesbians to the gas!’; ‘We will do with you what Hitler did with the Jews’).\(^{22}\) Paweł Lewicki observes that the old myth of the ‘Jewish plot’ is also still alive and well in Poland today, and has migrated onto the concept of ‘gender ideology’ [ideologia gender], a blanket ill-defined threat to the unity of Polish national Catholicism.\(^{23}\) It thus follows that the infamous ‘LGBT-free zones’,
which occupied up to as much as a third of Polish territory, were introduced as a warped ‘symbolic opposition to the state socialist system of the past, which brought feminism and was imposed by the Soviet occupation, in which Jews were also seen as complicit’.24 Legacies of twentieth-century Polish anti-Semitism repeat in the first decades of this century, not only referencing histories of the Holocaust and Jewish ghettos, or even the postwar renewed anti-Jewish sentiments that haunted the communist period, but also the interwar years of pronounced nationalist sentiment accompanying newly independent Poland after 1918, to which I return later in the essay. The twenty-first-century demands of the far right that queers make themselves invisible refers directly to a ‘strategy […] reminiscent of the anti-Semitic demands of the nationalist right to discriminate against Jews in Poland in the interwar period […] which is the official heritage of PiS [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, the Law and Justice party]’.25 In this terrifying landscape of insidious and historical paranoia, however, there have also been opportunities for Jewish-queer solidarities. For example, in the aftermath of the 2020 mass protests against state-sanctioned homophobia which resulted in escalated police violence and unlawful detentions of queer activists, the Jewish Board of Warsaw issued an official statement against ‘dehumanisation of LGBT people’ in Poland, commenting that the officials had ‘learned very little from the history and the horrors of the Second World War’.26

In this landscape, The Muranów Lily, through speculation and affective readings of history, considers how queer and trans Jewish lives from Poland might be honoured, remembered and enlivened while facing archival omissions or violent silencing. Nemer’s proposal for the three-week residence was to produce an audio guide connecting myth and speculation with historical traces of Jewish presence in the Warsaw neighbourhood of Muranów, and especially to illuminate and animate the missing queer contexts of Polish Jewish histories and of POLIN. He had anticipated spinning his narrative around an object found in the Museum but was surprised to find a scarcity of historical artefacts in the Core Exhibition.27

POLIN’s permanent Core Exhibition encompasses a thousand years of Jewish history in Poland divided into ten chronologically arranged galleries, constructing a narrative through ‘artefacts, paintings, interactive installations, reconstructions and models, video projections, sounds and words’ (plate 1 and plate 2).28 The result is one of relentless noise. The sheer volume of interactive screens requires choices that a casual visitor might not be equipped to make or risk a decontextualised, fragmentary narrative. As Kamil Kijek wrote, competent navigation of the Core Exhibition demands a significant amount of cultural and historical knowledge.29 Contributing to the sense of confusion are overlapping sound installations which

![Installation view of the Core Exhibition, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw (Paradisus Iudaeorum gallery), 2014. Photo: Magdalena Starowieyska/Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich.](image)
preclude any possibility of silent reflection. In fact, the Core Exhibition generates overstimulation and exhaustion, engendering an embodied experience of being pushed through the rooms. The jittery feeling I had in the exhibition prompted me to move through the rooms briskly, fruitlessly seeking an anchor for my attention, escaping the reach of one invasive sound installation only to move into the orbit of another.

Following the Museum’s opening in 2014, in the heated debate around POLIN’s role and the kind of history it presents, what drew a wave of criticism and even disappointment from audiences both in Poland and abroad was the scarcity of historical artefacts at POLIN. In ‘Polin: The Ultimate Lost Object?’ and ‘The Empty Museum’, the Polish anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and the Director of the Jewish Museum in London, Abigail Morris, lament the absence of ‘authentic objects’ at POLIN. In response, the performance and Jewish studies scholar and the POLIN Director, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, argued that the museum’s main achievement was to create ‘a total work of art, whose elements work to create the whole’, untenable by most Jewish museums which are object-based. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett delegates these museums to the historical lineage of ‘cabinets of curiosity’, as opposed to POLIN which she places as a successor of ‘history of exhibition’ emerging from the tradition of world’s fairs. She continues:

Although these two strands are merging in many museums today, thanks also to developments in contemporary art and performance, there is still resistance, especially on the part of art historians and collection curators, to a multimedia narrative exhibition with relatively few original objects. For them and for many visitors, the material presence of an authentic original object makes an irrefutable truth claim through its irreducible and irreplaceable materiality, its authority as material witness.33

Even if unwittingly, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s defence of the Museum’s departure from objecthood resonates with queer methods of archiving and exhibiting. Queer cultures, often devoid of material artefacts, rely on ephemera, oral histories and archives of—rather than material objects—affect, feelings and desire. With no objects to dictate an exhibition’s reception, a different kind of storytelling is possible, one that relies on imagination, fantasy and the audience’s empathic engagement to witness the narrative proposed by a museum. Perhaps this is how The Muranów Lily finds its place in the otherwise unqueer space of POLIN. The objectless yet embodied mode of viewing is what Nemer offers to his audiences. The audio guide’s plea to abandon the Museum suggests also a possibility of disobedience to the origins of European museal traditions, as cabinets of curiosities as well as the lineage of world’s fairs, which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to in the above citation. Both modes of exhibiting are implicated in colonial violence and both serve as testaments to the European drive towards taxonomic ordering.

The focus not on how the (inevitable) lack of objects in the Museum as a superior mode of exhibiting, but rather what such objectlessness may offer, might better conjure possibilities for the visitors to encounter the Museum through queer, trans and decolonial narratives of Nemer’s audio guide. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses, albeit not in a queer/trans context, one such opportunity that this approach of an objectless museum has offered: the reconstruction of the Gwoździec Synagogue in the core exhibition at POLIN, where the process of its reconstruction itself becomes the museal object. She described the process of rebuilding of the synagogue in ‘Inside the Museum:’

[W]hile you may never be able to recover the original object in the sense of the original material, the tangible heritage, you can recover the knowledge of how to build it—that is, the intangible heritage—by using traditional materials, tools, and techniques. […] The timber-frame roof and painted ceiling of our wooden synagogue are based on documentation of the wooden synagogue that once stood in Gwoździec, today in Ukraine. What we created is not a copy, facsimile, reproduction, or recreation—it is an actual object, a new kind of object, whose value lies not in the materials from which it was made but in the knowledge that was recovered from the way it was made.34

It truly is striking to think about the process as a museal ‘object,’ especially in preserving ephemeral, unwritten histories, those most fragile and prone to disappearance. Preserving the process itself is a crucial element of preserving lived experience as material, similar to collecting oral histories to preserve a story of a community, of unwritten lives, of affect. The process such as this one not only allows the viewer to admire the splendour of the synagogue but also makes evident the labour of its making. It activates the viewers viscerally, transporting them into the
time and space that conceived of that strenuous process. It brings closer the sensation of warm wood and cool tile to those of the workers whose labour brought the synagogue into existence in the eighteenth century.

The continuous undoing and redoing is often a queer mode of preservation too, signalling an ongoing and persistent queer renewal. Following this trope of undoing and redoing as queer memorialisation, opportunities of The Muranów Lily Nemer presents to his audiences are those of undoing by fantasy and redoing by speculation. The importance of Nemer’s work lies precisely in the artist’s encouragement to embody, to trace, to go off the expected routes of a good Museum visitor, and instead inhabit the POLIN grounds in order to reclaim spaces swallowed by the singular discourse of nationalist history, to invade the linear narrative of the Museum with disruptive traces of polyvocality of Polish-Jewish pasts. It is particularly crucial to pay attention to such possibilities of straying from the institution-designed routes in the light of the narrative of ‘Polish innocence’ which POLIN cultivates, both in its exhibition rooms, as well as the surrounding square.35

Until 2013, when the new Museum opened, the only symbolic centre of Jewish memory in Warsaw had been the 1948 Monument of the Fighters and Martyrs of the Ghetto, designed by Nathan Rappaport and Leon Marek Suzin. Out of the ten new monuments now surrounding the Museum, another three are devoted to the 1943 Ghetto Uprising, one identifies the Germans as the perpetrators, and six glorify histories of Polish helpers to the Jews.36

Given the Museum’s noisiness and both the limitations and opportunities objectlessness may offer, it seems fitting that Nemer chose to take his narrative outside, ‘feeling that the Museum was the wrong place for a deep listening experience’.37 Instead of an (absent) museal artefact, he employed a plethora of archival materials locating his narrative somewhere between history and fiction, and blurring their boundaries. His starting point was a short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer, ‘Two’ (1976), originally published in the New Yorker, which Nemer transplanted onto the Warsaw landscape with the aid of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century maps of Muranów, a pre-war centre for Jewish life in the city. Through this topology, Nemer wove a history of turn-of-the-century botany in the person of the Polish-German scientist Eduard Strasburger.38 He also developed a score performed by the POLIN Choir as a fictional folk song which, in his narrative, serves reportedly as folkloric and the only existing record of the lily.

Tracing the route around the POLIN building, Nemer engages with architectural and landscaping elements. He weaves into the visitors’ embodied experience of the building and its surroundings a fictional tale which nonetheless animates, as Jennifer Evans writes, something very ‘real’ in the experience of encountering traces of invisible, silenced histories of queer Jewishness in Warsaw.39 Nemer’s audio guides, or what Evans aptly calls ‘aural experiments in song and story’, are able to deliver a non-linear, empathic narrative which seeps into the crevices of history imbuing them with new meanings and new affects.40

The listener—or the performer of Nemer’s audio guide—might emerge from the story discombobulated, somehow haunted. The apparitional effects of the encounters of history and fabulation in The Muranów Lily are nothing short of bizarre. Where Nemer waves this work off as such, perhaps ‘bizarre’ takes on different meanings in its afterlives. I follow a line of enquiry which deliberately overreads Nemer’s work, proposing that a spectral presence—a dybbuk?—is a driving force of the story delivered by the artist; that the artist himself, perhaps, was haunted. What Nemer calls a ‘mess’ of a work is where José Muñoz might locate the ‘anticipatory illumination of art’, the...
ability of an aesthetic encounter with history to communicate the not-yet-realised potential of a queer reading.\textsuperscript{41} This anticipatory illumination allows us a glimpse into what we do not yet know we already know, not unlike a dybbuk’s eerie presence shedding light on histories which do not want to admit we already know.

\textbf{I Want to Tell You about a Painting…}

Headphones in, Nemer immediately lures the listener outside the POLIN building. The initial relief at the opportunity to exit the overstimulating exhibition, ‘abuzz with interactive media, touch screens, ink jet prints, costumes and rotating installations’ turns into a delightful promise, as Nemer’s voice gently begins:\textsuperscript{42} ‘I want to tell you about a painting. A painting that is meant to be hanging here in the Museum’ (timestamp 00:00–00:05) ‘Some say the painting was stolen’, Nemer (timestamp 00:54–00:56) continues and anticipation grows of discovering something illicit, secret, something that no one else has seen or experienced for the longest time—maybe ever. The artist frequently reminds his audiences that what they are experiencing is a speculation, a fantasy, a rumour, not so much untrue as ripe with possibility: \textit{some say}, he repeats as he delves into the story. He weaves a tale about a fictional painting of a lily which had been, reportedly, stolen from the Museum. Since no one can remember what it looked like, all that remains are legends and folk tales of the lily which, \textit{some say}, once—and only once—blossomed in Muranów, astonishing and mocking the botanist efforts to document and research her—and him—and them. For the lily, fluctuating between female, male, both, and neither, evaded any easy gendering, replicating over and over in different forms, until, \textit{some say}, they chose to do so no more.

The experience of following Nemer’s voice around the Museum is uniquely captivating. He directs the listener to specific spots surrounding POLIN, anchoring the fictional tale in the palpably tangible topology. He narrates to a listener standing right outside of the main POLIN entrance:

\begin{quote}
Like many stories that recount a provenance of a flower, like the hyacinth and the narcissus, the story of the Muranów Lily is a legend, a dramatic tale of love and metamorphosis, and the story takes place right here where you are standing. […] Just left of the monument, in front of the main entrance, there is a small park with a growth of trees, walking paths, and wooden benches. Find a spot here. Stand below a tree, wander in the grass, sit on a bench. Find a spot here, and let me take you back one hundred years, maybe more—no one is quite sure—to when our story begins. (timestamp 02:55–03:41).
\end{quote}

Throughout the narrative, Nemer continues to root and entangle his characters—human, vegetal and spectral—in fragments of the landscape: mounds of earth, a tree-shaded promenade, the Anielewicza Street tenements.

The lily, Nemer ventures, is a haunting dybbuk-like appearance of Zisl, a shtetl teen in nineteenth-century Poland who liked nothing more than scouring his mother’s wardrobe, adorning himself with tassels and jewellery, trying on her long skirts, luscious shawls and embroidered caftans. Soon, he met Ezriel, and the pair bonded over long sessions at the yeshiva, discovering the pleasures of learning, knowing, studying, and of love and desire which blossomed as they thought deeply and argued about Talmudic texts. As they knew would be expected of them, both were married off by their families. They went separate ways—Ezriel to the town of Radzymin, Zisl to Łomianki, with Warsaw and the Vistula River unfolding between
them, mapping the geography of their separation. Years passed, and when Zisl received an unexpected letter from Ezriel, a renewed longing pushed him to action. Alone in the house, he rummaged through his wife’s wardrobe. He left his town dressed in her clothes, unrecognised, and kept walking until he reached Ezriel. Reunited, Zisl, who could now live as a woman and took the name Zisa, and Ezriel decided to relocate to Warsaw. There, it was possible to map their desire, to inscribe their lives onto the topology of the city in ways unthinkable in their provincial towns. Warsaw, once stretched between Radzymin and Łomianki mapping their separateness, was now inviting and brim with possibility. Living an outwardly normative marital life, Zisa and Ezriel became beloved members of the Jewish community of Muranów and spent the remainder of their lives together, as they had envisaged back in their yeshiva days.

According to one legend Nemer relays, Zisa’s perceived transgression was discovered after her death, in preparation for the burial. Enraged by what they saw as deceit, outraged locals attacked and beat frail widowed Ezriel to death. The pair was buried in a nearby meadow with no ceremony or kaddish. Their makeshift, unmarked grave soon became overgrown with grass and wildflowers. One day, an extraordinary flower blossomed where the pair were buried: ‘The lily repeatedly switched its sex, expressing sexual differences at different stages of its growth. Its white flowers were male, its black flowers – female, and the veil of autumn blossoms displayed a lively burst of pistols, stamens, and sex organs’. (timestamp 22:57–23:17).

The following year, The Muranów Lily did not reproduce, and it was never seen again, not in Muranów, or anywhere else, to this day. It appeared, and grew, and bloomed, and withered, in the months after Zisa and Ezriel’s deaths, and then, never again. […] Some say the lily that was both and neither male and female was surely Zisa’s ghost, a kind of dybbuk that had tried to possess the neighbourhood. Thus, the Muranów Lily entered into legend, known only through tales told by those who witnessed its extraordinary […] blossoming. (timestamp 24:14–25:44).

The lily’s elusive character, the fluidity of the flower’s transformations, and reluctance to be described and categorised seem to have been permeated with Zisa and Ezriel’s ghostly presences, and their persistence to make themselves somehow known. Evans argues that

The tale of the Muranów Lily, entirely fictionalized, nevertheless manages to say something tangible and ‘real’ about Jewish and queer experience. In moments of absence so profound, stylized encounters such as these hold the potential to re-animate some measure of the dynamism and texture of community, opening up a space for new ways of thinking about the plurivocality of the past. And in this sense, creative undertakings like these in spaces of ‘difficult heritage’ allow us to think more capaciously about what geographers refer to as place, which unlike spaces on a map, or monuments, and memorials, provide an emotional sense of connectedness to the past.43

The sparse writing about The Muranów Lily is largely preoccupied with the form through which Nemer accesses the plurality of histories dwelling in a space. Similarly to Evans, Dariusz Brzostek in a piece accompanying the audio guide’s launch at
POLIN writes that *The Muranów Lily* is a story of a search for identity.44 I argue that the ‘search’ or ‘opening new spaces’ that Brzostek and Evans emphasise in their essays is, rather than the focus of Nemer’s piece, a starting point for a much more complex exploration the artist invites. It is a story not simply of searching, but of encountering, coming-into-contact and intertwining; not simply of opening, but of coming inside, taking space, of allowing oneself to be haunted by history. Evans’ compelling argument takes the first step towards building an affinity with presences of past lives, recognises them, yet hesitates to reach out. As Evans writes that the work says ‘something’ about the experience of being Jewish and queer, I want to know what this something could have been and could be, how to access it and what exactly we may discover. The affinity I sense with the lily, the responsibility for the history they want to tell, the affection towards them, propel me to seek out traces, chase ghosts, and burrow through cinders, or what Derrida so aptly calls remains without remainder. Cinders are a tingling sense of a former life with no evidence but more than simply imagined, ‘nothing that can be in the world, nothing that remains as an entity [étant]. It is the being [l’être], rather’.45

The feeling of looking to where the lily, according to Nemer’s tale, had grown in Warsaw, brings an overwhelming sense of witnessing history—though it is not one encountered in a history or botany textbook. It is, rather, a breathtaking sense that the history is here-and-now, experienced continuously in the present. It also attunes the viewer to multitudes of eventualities in the urban space and consequently to the multitude of mappings of that space, traced by past lives and their encounters. Nemer conjures queer ghosts of Warsaw’s Jewish past not simply to recognise their presence, but rather to engage them viscerally and through shared space across time, and to let them stay through inhabiting us, our desire and embodiment. At times we do not know whether it is history or fiction we are experiencing, revealing the complex and fraught relationship between them as two distinct, or even opposite, categories. Zisa and Ezriel’s fictionality is, I argue, speculative. Revealing archival eliminations, their story makes it in fact impossible to determine if they were not real, even if we now read them as a legend. The nebulous link between fact and fiction in the audio guide—and in this article—is a provocation, repeating the tenuous logic compressing apparent Ashkenazi gender and racial difference into pseudoscientific eugenicist ‘fact’. The lily, as a haunting, is also both—as we may well be looking for a non-existent flower, the stuff of legend, we are also holding out, hoping in vain that we may grasp a handful of a ghost, but never do. Importantly, the power of this work is nested in an understanding that the listener requires little historical context to gauge the emotional load of the audio guide—the visceral sense of loss, absence, the archival silence, the impossibility of Zisa and Ezriel’s love in the fatigued landscape of haunted Warsaw are all clearly readable.

**The Lily Was a Kind of Dybbuk…**

In an environment of hostility towards both queerness and Jewishness in Poland we may follow Nemer’s proposition that the lily is, in fact, a *dybbuk*. More precisely, it is Zisa’s floral incarnation who returns to Muranów as a *dybbuk*. Zisa’s is not a story of a solitary possession, but one which speaks of collectivity, and of histories of the repressed abject rendered voiceless, not by her own death but by systemic powers at play. The *dybbuk*’s haunting, too, extends beyond the lily’s life cycle, and its grievances are transhistorical and cross-generational.

While we might think of Nemer’s strategy of queering the museum through the relationship of object and objectlessness and their ability to tell a story, the transing
potential resides perhaps in Zisa’s story itself and in thinking about embodiment
made complex by the lack of a body on display. Relating and responding to Zisa’s
story told but not shown enables a reading of her body through the listener’s
experience—and thus the experience which may transgress a gender binary.46
Imagining Zisa can take endless forms and boundless embodiments, inviting
everyone who listens to lend themselves to and invite her possessions.

During her life, Zisa had become a beloved and well-respected member of
the Jewish community of Muranów. That her body evaded binary categorisations
became only evident to others in her death, when the women who had known and
loved Zisa undressed her to perform rituals preparing her body for the burial. The
force of the collective rage, enticed by the perceived transgression of cisgendered
heterosexuality, focused on surviving Ezriel. His own body, old and frail, did not
withstand the violence of the murderous mob. Violence continued after Zisa and
Ezriel’s deaths—they were buried outside of the cemetery walls in an unmarked
ground, with no ceremony or kaddish to ease their passage into the realm of death, and
left to be forgotten.

When, unexpectedly, the theretofore unseen lily sprouted and blossomed on
their burial site, they came—I argue—as a warning. Yet, the community of Muranów
saw it, Nemer says in the audio guide, as a welcome beautification of the otherwise
unpleasant corner of the area. The aesthetic function of the flower, as often happens,
masked their agency and obfuscated the story they told.47 The flower might have
even been read as narratively natural, signifying a fulfilment of rituals surrounding
one’s death. Thus the dybbuk remained unrecognised or unnoticed altogether—and
so did its warnings. Zisa’s dybbuk, in its floral incarnation, brought the message of the
necessity to evade forcible categorisations. The lily’s story was one of the dangers
of grouping, naming, classifying and of ‘isolating characteristics and identifying
features that corresponded and differed across different individuals, regrouping and
arranging everything living as species and families’.48 The lily’s story, in short, was
one of the colonising entrapments of botany, and of the quiet but deadly violence
of scientific naming and organising which ‘came to influence the development of
scientific racism’.49 This became crucial to taxonomies of race and sexuality, opening
the door for eugenics as a scientific discipline.

Yet, the lily’s story was also one of the flower’s escape and their agential refusal
of such taxonomies. In his audio guide, Nemer tells the ‘discovery’ of the lily
puzzling the botanists. One in particular, the Polish-German Eduard Strasburger,
had embarked on a mission to examine, probe and describe the ever-changing
characteristics of the lily, visual, material and sexual. At the intersection of history
and fiction, Nemer relays that Strasburger had named the flower lilium muranovese,
‘following Linnean binominal nomenclature’. (timestamp 23:35–23:41). No sooner
had the lily been named than an expectation to re-perform their spectacular self-
pollination annually was fixed. Here, the scientific hopes of Strasburger and his
fellow botanists who flocked to Muranów were stifled—the lily never appeared
again. This rejection of categorisation and naming is complex: first, refused by
the lily embodying both the dybbuk and Zisa, it signifies a deliberate departure
from colonial systems of ordering and classifying as categories which effectively
enabled the systemic erasure of Jewish people based precisely on racial, sexual and
gender categories ascribed onto them. Second, the refusal is that of Zisa: a refusal of
committing to a binary understanding of her identity and embodiment, a refusal of
being named and choosing her own name instead. This way, both the lily and Zisa
evaded the scientific purpose of being quickly and easily recognisable as categorised
and categorisable. Here is where the lily’s warning to the turn-of-the-century Jewish community of Muranów and its hollow sound remaining unacknowledged become particularly haunting.

The flower further displayed their agency of disrupting categorisation by refusing the binary gendering of Zisa’s body. The blossoming of the lily marking Zisa’s place of burial signals that her life met no determined end, certainly not one imposed by gender-normative necropolitical power holders. The lily, fluidly inhabiting all genders and no gender at all, repeated Zisa’s evasion of a narrow meaning of becoming as a single-direction transition into a woman, making rather ‘a series of transitions without destination’. The lily made these narrow binary nominations ill-fitting, insufficient, the scientific gatekeepers trying and failing to categorise the flower’s sex markers. Instead, the lily’s continued becoming marked a rejection of trans necropolitics ‘that has a historical legacy in settler colonial domination, slavery’, and, according to C. Riley Snorton, ‘the founding of American gynaecology in “the medical plantation.”’

That rejection of being exclusively subscribed to narratives of death, as well as of pain and humiliation as markers of being trans, promise a possibility of non-normative, more-than-human dying and death, which refuses its containment within straight, cis, biopolitical end-of-life discourses. The lily reconceptualised Zisa’s death not as a pivotal life-ending event but rather as a ‘process of transformation that [formed] part of life itself’. The flower, too, resisted being consigned to the epistemic death of classification, initially through self-sustaining pollination, then by rendering botanists’ effort to research them obsolete, and eventually becoming the stuff of legend and folklore, retaining a haunting presence over Muranów. In doing so, both Zisa and the lily ‘refused[d] to perpetuate the epistemological and symbolic violence […] of dismissing some deaths as not “worth enough,” not grievable enough, not even seen as “deaths” in the full sense of the word’. This reconsideration of death as transition or a transformation further lends itself to the understanding of the lily as Zisa’s dybbuk, as well as the dybbuk’s afterlives after the lily’s refusal to return.

How the Dybbuk Sticks

Delving further into conceptualisations of the dybbuk, in this section I explore its narrative possibilities in relation to the particular discourses of sexual, gender and racial difference of Ashkenazi Jews in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Poland. I frame the historical discussion through the lens of two plays, Sholem Ash’s God of Vengeance (1906) and S. An-sky’s The Dybbuk (1913–16), as cultural vehicles encapsulating anxieties around preconceptions of Jewish sexual excess at the time. In doing so, I trace the ways in which, in the plays, the dybbuk and lesbian homoeroticism perform in the guise of heteronormativity in order to demonstrate the indelible character of these anxieties bubbling under the surface of the collective consciousness. They are, I argue, crucial to a nuanced understanding of the ways in which Nemer’s work brings its audiences closer to a profound visceral, embodied encounter with queer Jewish histories of Muranów. His narrative fulfils a similar role of telling a story of queer and trans identities in the guise of the heteronormativity of Zisa and Ezriel’s relationship. Yet, The Muranów Lily enables a transgression of this facile reading, particularly due to the lack of the bodies in the narrative that the listener supplants with their own embodiment, thus offering a potential to challenge the default preconception of Zisa’s body as gendered in a particular way.

Another refusal and a warning of the trap of naming come precisely from Zisa’s dybbuk haunting the lily. This possession echoes and complicates the rejection of being
named and categorised through uncovering of particular histories of Ashkenazi ‘unfitting’ gender and sexuality, especially in the face of the modernising drive on the cusp of the Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment). These histories, through a cultural and historical understanding of a dybbuk, especially speak to the anxieties around gender and sexuality in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Poland.

The tensions between Jewish and gentile Poles and the anxieties around Ashkenazi sexual difference and excess found their way into Sholem Ash’s controversial play God of Vengeance (1906), strikingly expressed through a portrayal of lesbian desire. In the play, Rifkele, a daughter of Jankiel who runs a brothel in the basement of his house, enacts heteronormative scenarios of courting rituals with Manke, a woman working for Rifkele’s father. Manke seduces Rifkele inserting herself into her fantasy of a sexual encounter with a bridegroom-to-be:

MANKE: You are my beloved, and I am your beloved. We are embracing (she embraces her) very tightly and kiss quietly (they kiss). We blush, we are so embarrassed. Isn’t this wonderful, Ryfkele, is not this wonderful?

RYFKELE (concurs): Yes Manke, yes.

MANKE […] And then we are in one bed together, no one knows, just you and me, just like now.59

The women plot to escape Jankiel’s house and start a new life together. Rifkele’s insubordination ultimately results in Jankiel renouncing her as his daughter and no longer a ‘pure Jewish child’ and banishing her ‘downstairs, to the brothel’. Jankiel’s fixation on Rifkele’s purity is expressed in the absolute separation he wishes to maintain between the house, protected by the Torah scroll he had ordered, and the basement where the brothel is based, which Jankiel sees as shameful and impure. Although the play was criticised for its depiction of immoral sexual acts, it was predominantly the transactional character of the Torah scroll (Jankiel paid for it to protect Rifkele from evil) and its presence in the brothel that the critics in Poland took an issue with.60

While there is much scholarship surrounding God of Vengeance and its transgressions, it is largely focused around the New York reception of the play and the indecency trial which ended its run on Broadway in 1923. In these readings, such as that of Seidman, the grounds for the indecency complaint ‘may well have conformed to the colonial model of self-consciousness about Jewish sexual difference in the face of genteel (and Gentile) norms’.61

This Ashkenazi sexual difference had been, by then, well established. Amy K. Milligan notes in Jewish Bodylore that the figure of the feminised Jewish man was prominent as early as the fourteenth century.62 This feminisation, derived from the conviction that Jewish men menstruate, ‘[stemmed] from a misinformed belief that the circumcised penis continued to bleed, hence rendering the phallus female’.63 According to Milligan, this myth, still prevalent well into the nineteenth century, upheld the associations of insufficiencies of Jewish masculinity with effeminacy and non-normative desire.64

In the late nineteenth century, as early days of capitalism transformed notions of labour, domesticity, socialisation and leisure, emerging medical and scientific discourses in the West gave rise to the new category of ‘homosexuality’.65 As Naomi Seidman and Daniel Boyarin note in their respective bodies of work, and considering
earlier views on Jewish ‘unfitting’ gender identities, it was no accident that the invention of the category coincided with the influx of Ashkenazi Jews into Western Europe.\textsuperscript{66} Identities of Eastern European Jews complicated binary gender structures of Western societies. Seidman describes this incongruence in her essay ‘Reading ‘Queer’ Ashkenaz: This Time from East to West.’

[in Western Europe], Jewish modernization, Europeanization, and embourgeoisement emerged as an encounter between radically asymmetrical gender orders and sexual systems: on the one hand stood the traditional Ashkenazic structure, with roots in Rabbinic-Talmudic culture and rich embodiment among the Eastern European Jewish masses; on the other hand appeared the bourgeois European sexual system, with roots in Greco-Roman, Christian, and heroic-chivalric cultural formations, in which modernizing Jews aspired to participate.\textsuperscript{67}

Seidman also notes that while queer studies has ‘revalorised’ Jewish queerness, it nevertheless approaches it from the colonialist vantage point whereby the queer Jew is a departure from the normative European model.\textsuperscript{68}

Reading instead ‘from East to West’, then, is crucial not only to reconstruct and imagine these specific identities in Eastern European contexts, but also to challenge the centrality and perceived universality of the Western models of queerness, to ‘reverse this colonial gaze, allowing Ashkenazic culture to provide the theoretical apparatus for its self-analysis’.\textsuperscript{69}

This is a crucial approach to a deconstruction of Jewish and queer identities from a decolonial perspective in order to also, through a contemporary lens, de-weaponise these intersectional identities as gendered and racial undesired others, a dangerous reading pertinent in Poland today. As Boyarin argues, the nineteenth-century scientific drive to organise and categorise inevitably identified ‘“essential” markers of difference and [grounded] them in nature’.\textsuperscript{70}

The Ashkenazi sexual and gender difference thus became the Jewish racial difference. This ‘scientific’ turn was echoed by both Jewish and non-Jewish scientists in Poland as the discourses of Jewish difference gained momentum in the early twentieth century, with developing research into eugenics.\textsuperscript{71} Suggestions followed that integration of Jews in Poland would not be desirable due to their low levels of fitness compared to Aryan Polish men. Instead, according to anthropologist Karol Stojanowski, Jewish people ‘either have to emigrate or to restrict their natural growth or simply to die out’.\textsuperscript{72}

As Jewish bodies and their difference found themselves under intense scrutiny in early twentieth-century Poland, Jewish men’s imperfect performance of masculinity and preconceptions of their effeminacy did not leave much room for exploration and performance of queer Jewishness. Drawing on Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of temporal drag, Seidman argues for ‘a reading of Yiddish drag that recognises a broader field of erotic engagement beyond “proper” gender performance and the homosexual-heterosexual binary’, through which to explore precisely Jewish queerness as belonging to its own temporality—glimpses of queer Jewish time in the monumental time of Poland and the Polish nation.\textsuperscript{73}

Early twentieth-century Poland, particularly the interwar years, saw strong nationalist sentiments exacerbated by the newly regained independence (1918) following the period of over a century of the Polish Partitions (1772–1918), dividing Polish territories among Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The
political programmes of Roman Dmowski, the founder of the National-Democratic Party, and his opponent Józef Piłsudski, leader of the Polish Socialist Party, were disparate in their visions for free Poland. Yet, both strove to strengthen national identity, and the question of whether one may be both Jewish and truly Polish was at the heart of the debate on Polish identity. Stereotypes about money and opportunity-grubbing Jews exacerbated political tensions and hostile attitudes. Preconceptions of Jewish affiliations with pornography and sex work were particularly prolific, contributing to the anxiety of the gender difference of Ashkenazi Jews.

The prejudice against Jewish-run ‘brothels’ in Polish cities aggravated the already reluctant approaches towards Jewish men, stereotyped as opportunist cutthroat entrepreneurs, and Jewish women as insatiably hypersexual. Agata Dąbrowska wrote that ‘It was believed that [Jewish men] depraved Polish society, and Jewish women allegedly constituted the majority of prostitutes’. The 1918 article ‘Antysemityzm “prostytucyjny”’ (“Prostitutional” Antisemitism), published anonymously in a weekly Glos żydowski (The Jewish Voice), quotes a text which appeared in a Warsaw daily Gazeta Poranna 2 Grosze (The Morning Paper 2 Grosze) on the issue of Jewish involvement in sex work: ‘The so-called “night moths” are a plague in Warsaw—all Jewish women. Streets of Nalewki, Gęśia, Miła and other Jewish streets send out their Różas, Salcias and Ryfkas, and no one disturbs the parades of these licentious daughters of Israel’.

In the Polish context the objection, though never addressed directly, was not that Ash’s play touched upon Jewish homoeroticism, but rather Jewishness and homoeroticism in Poland, both implicated in endangering Polishness through their innate immorality and backwardness. The editor of the nationalist paper Myśl Niepodległa (Independent Thought), which often published anti-Semitic writings, reviewed the play favourably, claiming that ‘Ash was “his nation’s conscience” who uncovered the grim reality. He candidly showed, according to the reviewer, “the ignorance, egoism, heavy materialism, and superstitions of his brothers.”’ God of Vengeance became only a pretext for Polish nationalist circles to join the discussion about Jewish presence in the Polish culture. Certainly, the moral and intellectual superiority assumed by this (anonymous) Polish reviewer revealed a lot about the anxiety surrounding unfitting Jewish sexualities and the depths of Jewish immorality, unavoidably culminating with lesbian sex in basements-turned-brothels, and with the licentious ‘daughters of Israel’ and their greedy pimps poisoning the straight-thinking, healthy Poles. The play was, at least for this Polish critic, an admonishment of the Jewish guilt of excess.

While The Muranów Lily does not touch upon sex work, God of Vengeance provides a crucial cultural context to the landscape of Nemer’s story, conflating lesbianism and sex work under the umbrella of sexual transgression and excess. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Muranów is necessarily saturated with references to Jewish sexual excess and the sexual and gender difference marking Jewish racial difference. The ‘streets of Nalewki, Gęśia, Miła’ listed by the anonymous writer in the Morning Paper centre these anxieties around Jewish sex unambiguously in Muranów—the centre of Jewish life in pre-war Warsaw. This context positions Zisa’s perceived transgression as dangerous and thus inviting violence enticed by the surrounding moral and sex panic. Her transgression appears also to confirm the abject Ashkenazi gender difference and, by association, Ezriel’s sexual difference, who, in Zisa’s absence, must face the panic-fuelled rage of the local community.

Where The God of Vengeance tapped into the moral panic around Ashkenazi sexual transgression and excess (received by genteel Polish critics as an admittance of Jewish
guilt), S. An-sky’s The Dybbuk (1913–16) serves as an affective, performative repository of these unresolved anxieties and unexpressed feelings. Together, the plays draw an image of repression of sexuality and gender symptomatic of the time. Where Ash’s work delves into how such repression is reiterated, An-sky’s play employs the figure of the dybbuk to suggest how it finds its way to the surface—through haunting and the unresolvedness of intergenerational trauma of suppressed desire. In the play, a bride, Leah, is possessed by the dybbuk of Chonen, her deceased lover, as she is set to marry someone else. Chonen had died attempting to use kabbalah in an effort to regain Leah after her father prohibited her and Chonen’s marriage. Through the dybbuk-possessed Leah, the wedding guests discover that hers and Chonen’s dead father had promised their children to each other long before Leah or Chonen were born. Eventually, Chonen’s dybbuk is exorcised from Leah’s body, who joins her beloved in death.

Naomi Seidman writes that in An-sky’s play, The heterosexual love affair/possession is at stage center, but the key to understanding its otherworldly power lies in the homoerotic friendship that refuses to be relegated to the past or to the background. [...] The homosexual and heterosexual love are mutually dependent and, as a combined system, act as the very engine of the social order rather than operating at its margins.

Seidman reads the dybbuk possession as an expression of the tensions between the old and the new. On one hand, it is a culmination of the modernising project of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, which aimed to bring Ashkenazi sexualities closer to the Western European model. On the other, the dybbuk expresses the insufficiencies of such a project in the face of the autochthonous Ashkenazi understandings of sexualities which transcend their Western iterations. Seidman writes that this liminality of the dybbuk does not unambiguously belong to neither the past nor the present, but is symptomatic of ‘the violently disrupted connection between them’. God of Vengeance, too, expresses such violent disruption between the old world of religious rule symbolised by the Torah scroll, and the new modernising world of capitalism—the brothel, both under Jankiel’s roof. Lesbian sex, initiated in the guise of heterosexual roleplay, is a dybbuk-like temporal ‘dragging’ of narratives of Ashkenazi sexual difference into the modernising ‘new world’.

I bring these plays together to argue that we may think of The Muranów Lily as another story of the kind—an exploration of the anxiety around Jewish gender and sexual difference, but transgressive of that anxiety through a reconfiguration of colonial, raced and sexed normative orders. Nemer’s audio guide retrieves anachronisms of the irrational, more-than-human, illogical, non-‘modern’ bodies of knowledge. He does so through the figure of the plant-dybbuk, a thread connecting then and now, and here and there. Returning pre-modernised bodies of knowledge to contemporary contexts, the audio guide bestows upon its audiences a possibility of reading beyond gender and sexual binaries cemented by the legacies of the European Enlightenment.

Naming the Muranów Lily a dybbuk, Nemer suggests that the demon’s work is not that of vengeance or self-serving pettiness. It is a disruptive yet calculated manifestation of hidden but persistent desires, of unresolved pasts to be addressed. With a dybbuk’s arrival, what was hidden becomes palpable, and what was in plain sight is uncovered as pretence. Dybbuk’s unresolved matters reveal themselves as a manifestation of the persistence (but not continuity) of unspoken desires always-already there, present
across time and space, even whilst consistently denied. The dybbuk’s grievances might be centuries old, but its lacks, absences and silences are as pertinent today, and their presence unshakeable. This unshakeability resides at the very core of the dybbuk, or perhaps is the dybbuk.

As Yoram Bilu writes, ‘The designation dybbuk [derives] from the Hebrew verb ‘davok’, to stick’. In Sara Ahmed’s conceptualisation of stickiness, she characterises it as affective saturation of ‘sites of personal and social tension’. Dybbuk’s stickiness as ‘saturated with affect’ is perhaps also how Crasnow characterises affect as a ‘never-ending process of ‘becoming’: a series of transitions without destination’. The dybbuk is genderless yet able to take on different identities and different genders, and its role is realised in never arriving at a final form. This, again, is where The Muranów Lily’s medium of the audio guide lends itself to becoming a dybbuk’s vehicle: the listeners queer and trans Zisa’s body through their own embodiments, become temporarily possessed by her shape-shifting spirit, as they lend their bodies to the dybbuk’s haunting to tell them a story of Zisa and the lily.

Indeed, the lily never came back after blossoming for the first time, but it seems as though the dybbuk never gave up on making its presence known, either. The audio guide finishes at the spot in Muranów where, Nemer tells his listeners, the lily had been seen for the first time. He leads his audience to a courtyard across the street from the main entrance to POLIN where, incredibly, he had found a crude outline of a flower drawn in the concrete (plate 3). Nemer chanced upon it while wandering around the neighbourhood, seeking a place where he could lead his audiences as the culmination of the chase after invisible traces of history, fiction and transhistorical affect. Nemer told me that, while the flower was ‘clearly not a lily’ but ‘a sort of crudely drawn daisy’, this serendipitous moment of discovery had been ‘a moment of slippage’ between the story he had been weaving and believed entirely fictional, and it seemingly appearing as material manifestation in the unassuming courtyard across the street from the Museum. It was almost like encountering a dried pressed flower in a book—a connective tissue between real events we desire to commemorate and our affective memory altering their shapes. Just as encountering the physicality of the flower between pages of a book always seems to come as a surprise, so too it appears that Nemer’s daydreaming had found its way into the geography of Muranów. It was the dybbuk, perhaps, making itself known, choreographing Nemer’s steps to encounter the flower as a sign of in-betweenness, the openness of history. This slippage, or ‘worlding the flower into being’, as Nemer put it, tells us how fiction, critical fabulation and speculation might be important for history and historical readings, especially where no archive exists. It is not that a materiality is always necessary to validate these speculations, but rather that the stories we weave and imagine in the absence of archives might just open fictional readings of history which account for very real lives, memories and affects. As Sadiyia Hartman wrote, critical fabulation is an attempt ‘to both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling’ while confronting the limitations of the archive with possibilities of speculation and ‘the capacities of the subjunctive’. This appeared even more striking to me as I ventured out on my own search for the lily in June 2022, only to find the courtyard blocked off and dug up for maintenance works. Peeping through the narrow gaps in the makeshift fencing, I saw the entire outermost layer of the courtyard where the flower would have been scraped off to reveal the underground Gordian knot of piping and cabling. The flower, it seems, is now gone for good, marking the third disappearance of the lily.
The flower which had originally blossomed after Zisa’s death was, as Nemer tells us, never seen again in Muranów or anywhere else. The painting of the lily—reportedly the only record in existence—had disappeared from the Museum, also never to resurface. Now, the anchoring of Nemer’s story will forever remain a mystery to those who follow the audio guide to the courtyard between the buildings at 7 and 9 Anielewicz Street. Yet, these brief appearances of the lily exhibit the characteristics of dybbuk-like, sticky possessions. While her story is told, the unresolvedness of Zisa’s death seems to never have been addressed in a broader context of violence against her queer and trans Jewishness. We are perhaps due another haunting. Nemer’s
listener may divine this from the climax of the audio guide. The narrative ends as we encounter the flower in the courtyard, as Nemer says:

In the middle of the paved area in the courtyard, you will find a small patch of earth. Some say this is where the first lily was seen. Someone has marked the spot by drawing a floral design into the asphalt around the patch of earth. Historians do not agree when and how the design got there, but some say it was traced by a child who saw her own story reflected in Zisa’s tale, who understood the importance of remembering and marking such things. And some say… (timestamp 26:54–27:32).

Here, the story dissolves into choral singing, with the performers of the POLIN Choir repeating the phrase ‘some say’ in polyphony. This transition from Nemer’s voice as the leading narrator throughout the audio guide to polyvocality reiterates the ebbs, flows and multidirectionality of a fictional tale implied by the sung phrase. It also suggests that there is more to hear, that more remains unshared, undiscovered, and that, ultimately, nothing has been resolved or altered—the dybbuk’s haunting has not yet fulfilled its purpose. The lily, once witnessed by Strasburger and never seen again, left their trace in legends, songs and ‘this one missing painting by Kramsztyk or de Lempicka or someone else, which seems was the only recorded visual depiction ever made, for Strasburger allegedly destroyed his botanical sketches of the lily in anger’. (timestamp 25:51–26:05). In a similar way, the audio guide alludes to the possibility of this flower found by Nemer to also become an unreliable witness to the history being told. This unintentional prophecy was fulfilled when the Anielewicza Street courtyard underwent maintenance works, erasing the flower. Yet, the traces always remain—and it is through these traces that another dybbuk haunting might be underway.

Imagining Nemer’s story of the Muranów Lily as a dybbuk possession of POLIN, with visitors asked to invite a polyphony of voices inside them, to allow the voices in their head to lead them to places of speculation, forgotten personal narratives, of, ultimately, unresolved pasts, is a starting point for thinking about queer and trans memorialisation, especially as they intersect with national and ethnic identities, where trade-offs between them are often a sore spot. Nemer uneartths Zisa and Ezriel’s grievances through a dybbuk-like, incomprehensible, haunting presence of the Muranów Lily. Their lives as queer Jews in Poland remain both uncelebrated and ungrieved. Just as their burial place was cast outside their Jewish community, so the profound absences of Ashkenazi sexualities, let alone queerness, continue to haunt the Polish conscience.

As Janicka notes, ‘[s]ymbolic topography is not so much a way of narrating the history of groups related to a particular place. It is rather a matter of controlling space. Therefore, the symbolic arrangement of an area exposes power relations between groups (dominance/submission)’. In this context, queer narratives have, of course, no area of official recognition in Warsaw or elsewhere in Poland comparable to the monuments of the POLIN Square. Memorialisation, then, of queer, trans, and Jewish narratives embedded in Warsaw’s history, and not only of trauma and death but also of life and thriving, is necessarily committed precisely to memory and one’s affective desire to uncover, understand and know them. The Muranów Lily’s ephemeral, fleeting quality which requires the listener’s active preparedness and embodiment, is a marking of trans and queer spaces of history through attachments, alliances and responsibilities for the archival other. While Nemer’s work importantly claims
physical space of the Museum and its surroundings, it does not do so with solidity and endurance of marble or steel. Rather, it relies on affect, memory, indeed on one’s willingness to become a host to a dybbuk. The work is a continuous becoming as, with new audiences, come new possibilities for cross-pollinations of affects and desires. Nemer’s narrative makes space in history not only for Zisa and Ezriel, who, although fictitious, are stand-ins for those Polish Jews who never have and may never be named by history.

Therein, in the lily’s pollination Nemer enables even after their death, also lies a worldmaking possibility, queer in the elusive, shimmering presence of ghosts inhabiting the spaces from which they had been erased. The Muranów Lily allows POLIN visitors to abandon this contested space of Polish/Jewish history and its selective memory. This is not in order to dismiss it in another bout of historical amnesia. Rather, it is to remap it, to let in the ghosts and immerse oneself in new possibilities of multiply thinking and feeling history. It is poignant that we should be encouraged to do so through imaginary characters which slip in and out of the historical trajectories and geographies, enabling us to sense in our bodies those whom the ground on which the Museum stands today had hosted. The act of leaving the Museum, despite of all its offerings, and following another narrative, one of speculation and fantasy outside of the rigid boundaries of history presented by POLIN, proposes a haphazard, desiring, embodied encounter with not a singular historical narrative, but a multitude of stories, often conflicting and incomplete.

Following the propositions of The Muranów Lily the visitors are presented with a choice to stray from the lines of hegemonic history and go ‘slantwise, […] where queer moments do happen’. Abandoning the straight lines the Museum dictates, but also straying from the slants of Nemer’s work, we may find ourselves lost, going in circles, going the ‘wrong’ way, and, accidentally, by losing the way and ‘losing’ history, uncovering what histories have been lost.

**Conclusions**

Nemer achieves something remarkable and indeed ‘bizarre’, albeit serendipitously. The Muranów Lily works much like myths and legends, vehicles for very present cultural and historical tensions, memories and anxieties. With minimal historical grounding, Nemer’s story manages to pose monumental questions about trans and queer Polish-Jewish pasts and their unresolvedness. In folklore, song and flowers, it captures the Enlightenment’s deadly drive to categorise and its far-reaching consequences for those whose difference resists modernity’s orders. The anticipatory illumination of art, it seems, often requires also a rejection of what Muñoz again calls rigour and ‘the need for a rigorous deployment of evidentiary procedure grounded in “material reality.”’ Nemer’s method is experiential which, in its non-adherence to traditional scholarly methods of collecting and presenting information ‘rigorously’, rejects, yet again, systems or ordering and categorisation. While he does not do so explicitly as part of the work’s method, his queer methods echo their embedded values of reconsidering the unimportant, marginalised bodies of knowledge. These methods implicitly reject the colonial orders of modernity and ‘the regime of rigor’ which upholds them.

The Muranów Lily encourages listeners to leave the Museum, to not contain Jewish histories within the limited mythology of POLIN. Instead, Nemer offers a new mythology, wherein the body and embodiment trace contemporary landscapes furrowed with memory. He proposes multiple vantage points: Zisa’s embodiment without a body as an invitation to inhabit the story with our own; Zisa and
Ezriel’s journey, through their embodiments, across time and space, to inhabit their identities; the shape-shifting body of the lily, eluding categorisations just as Ashkenazi Jews refused to fit into Western categories of gender and sexuality, eluding the scrutinising scientific gaze. The listeners’ bodies, too, provide, from the outset, vessels or hosts for new affective mythologisations of Polish Jews and their complex queerness. Their bodies perform mapping outwards, outside of the Museum as they walk away, spill out, embodying multiplicity, perhaps hosting the ghosts and dybbuks encircling the grounds of the former Jewish ghetto, whose histories will remain unresolved unless they are reckoned with.

This introductory attempt to bring together heretofore unexplored histories of Jewish queerness and sexuality in Poland is only a beginning. The proposal of looking at queer Jewish pasts in Poland through embodiment such as Nemer’s work suggests considers an entry point to uncovering such stories. Simply put, strolling around POLIN grounds, listening to The Muranów Lily, what do we see, feel and imagine? It is crucial to consider the audio guide’s transgression of the Museum as an invitation to see more than we are invited to see. This essay set out to outline a political and historical landscape where into Zisa and Ezriel may be written, and their story felt and imagined as entangled with many more lives just like theirs, navigating and negotiating the murky grounds of their contested identities as Polish as well as Jewish, trans and queer.

Nemer’s audio guide, of course, presents to the visitor a curated space, and perhaps even a gentle suggestion is taken as instruction by museum goers accustomed to more traditional audio guide narratives—but it is equally likely that a visitor, guided around the green museum grounds and lulled by Nemer’s calm, soothing voice and the summer sun, will instead rest on the grass to listen to the story without following the traces of the Muranów Lily. Perhaps they will be imagining, looking differently, inwardly, to find the legendary flower, to imagine the painting that never was. Perhaps they will debate the validity of the imposing narrative of the museum; perhaps they will seek their own connections with histories of Polish Jewishness, of Polish queerness, of queer Polish Jewishness, through their own bodies and own desire, perhaps even by seeking out archival ghosts and presences to forge new affective attachments, to acknowledge the double erasures both the Museum and the public sphere—Warsaw’s and Poland’s—perform. It is there, in these performances of embodying Nemer’s narrative, that the lily’s potential is found. Importantly, it disrupts the singular hegemonic narrative of the museum, encourages reflection and perhaps a further search. It forges embodied encounters with history, the consciousness of occupying a space of history, inhabiting the logic of temporal drag living out past always-already in the present.

Notes
I would like to dedicate this article to Benny Nemer, with affection and gratitude for conversation and friendship.

1 Benny Nemer, The Muranów Lily, 2015 (excerpt from audio guide, timestamp 00:00–01:18).
7 Nemer, interview, 2022.
9 Nemer, interview, 2022.
11 Nemer, interview, 2022.
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12 Nemér, interview, 2022.
14 Nemér, interview, 2022.
20 Nemér, interview, 2022.
24 Lewicki, 42.
27 Nemér, interview, 2022.
30 For further reading on the debate around POLIN, see e.g. the special issue of The Slavic Review: Poland and Polin: New Interpretations in Polish-Jewish Studies, 76: 3, 2017.
33 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 227.
34 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 228.
37 Nemér, interview, 2022.
40 Evans, 25.
42 Evans, 35.
43 Evans, 40.
45 Derrida, 55.
46 David Getz, ‘How to Teach Manet’s Olympia after Transgender Studies’, Art History, 45: 2, 2022, 349.
50 Bondestam, 123.
53 Martino and Omernicajic, 684.
57 Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke, 82.
59 Shenol Ash, Big Zemsty (God of Vengeance), Warsaw: Kultur Lige, 1919, 173–74.
63 Milligan, 5.
64 Milligan, 5.
67 Seidman, 2011, 50.
68 Seidman, 2011, 52.
69 Seidman, 2011, 52.
73 Seidman, 2011, 52.

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75 Kamil Janicki, Epoka Hipokryzy: Seks i erotyka w przedwojennej Polsce (The Era of Hypocrisy: Sex and Eroticism in Pre-War Poland, Kraków: Ciekawostki Historyczne, 2015.

76 ‘Antysemityzm ―prostytucyjny‖’ (‘“Prostitutional” Antisemitism’), Głos żydowski (The Jewish Voice), No. 32, 1918.

77 Dąbrowska, 295.

78 Dąbrowska, 302.

79 Seidman, 2003, 233.

80 Seidman, 2003, 233.

81 Seidman, 2003, 239.

82 Seidman, 2003, 259.

83 Jeffrey Shandler, ‘Queer Yiddishkeit: Practice and Theory,’ Shofar, 25; 1, 2006, 99; see also Freeman, Time Binds.


86 Ahmed, 11.

87 Crasnow, 49.

88 Nemler, interview.

89 Nemler, interview.


91 Janicka, 2015, 211.


93 Muñoz, 2009, 3.


95 Muñoz, 1996, 7.
Where is the Muranów Lily? Unearthing Traces of Queer Jewishness in Contemporary Warsaw

Aleksandra Gajowy

In this essay I explore the possibility of an embodied, desiring encounter with traces of queer Jewishness in contemporary Warsaw. Examining Benny Nemer’s 2015 experimental audioguide Lilia z Muranowa (The Muranów Lily), commissioned by POLIN, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, I propose a line of enquiry following a dybbuk-like haunting that the audioguide performs. In doing so, I investigate how desiring, affective speculation, legends and rumours might enable an encounter with history, if we allow ourselves to be haunted by them. I provide a landscape which the listener or the performer of Nemer’s experimental tale may engender with their desire, their body and their fantasy, in order to restore lives lost and forgotten in the archives, through the desiring archival subject: a queer Polish Jew.

Aleksandra Gajowy (she/her) is an Assistant Professor in Modern and Contemporary Art at University College Dublin. Her research focuses on narratives of queerness, race and Jewishness in Polish visual cultures since the nineteenth century. She is currently preparing a monograph on modern and contemporary lesbian art from Poland.